PS
8535
092C45

LE
R8803c

Christ in the Strand

and

Other Poems

by

JAMES A. ROY

172206
20/6/22

PS
8535
O92C45

THE JACKSON PRESS
PRINTERS AND BOOKBINDERS
KINGSTON, ONT.

By the Same Author.

The Dream of the Rood.
Cowper and His Poetry.
Pole and Czech in Silesia.

The persons and incidents described in this poem are entirely imaginary, and no reference to any living person is either made or intended.

TO

MY MOTHER

WHO

HAS ALWAYS UNDERSTOOD

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2007 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation

http://www.archive.org/details/christinstrandot00royjuoft

Christ in the Strand

I met her in a dingy little bar
Just off the Strand, a sordid, hidden place,
Where drunken sailors come, and betting touts
And loafing racing men, and grubby pimps
Bandy the dubious jest and vapid quip
With flaunting barmaids, handing over gin.
The soft air of the City, stealing in,
Reeking of petrol and a thousand smells
Blent with the moistened sawdust on the floor
And tanged the rank tobacco smoke and beer.
The clang of distant bells, cacophonous,
Clashed with the raucous gibe and bleery din.
A nigger with a banjo sang outside,
Some ranting rag-time ditty in the rain—
The moisty drizzle of a summer's day,
And, when he'd strummed a second melody—
To words of meaningless absurdity—
He whispered something to the odd grotesque,
His pal, who left the kerb and, stepping in,
Went round the heedless tipplers, hat in hand,
And raked in scanty pence; then, stealthily
Slipped to the bar and had a double Scotch.
A newsboy, plunging through the noisy crowd,
Shrieked out the latest scandal in the town;
A woman with a tattered hat and cloak,

Her grey hair, straggling in untidy wisps
About her ears—chewing her toothless gums,
Crept through the swinging doors, and, edging near,
Thrust out a skinny claw beneath my nose,
Mutt'ring the while, "A box o' matches, Sir,
Please buy some laces—matches, Gentleman."
A doddering hawker, with his tray of gauds,
Whose dirt-grimed knees peeped through his foetid rags,
And gaping boots betrayed his sockless feet,
Followed the newsboy with unsteady step,
And, jostled to the counter, at the end,
Mumbled his order for a pint of draught;
Pale, greasy, threadbare fellows, shifty-eyed,
Sat with their painted women at their side,
Tricked out in gaudy, tinsel finery,
Poor trulls, pale, sad, unappetizing lures,
Meshed in the toils of sordid circumstance,
Whose powdered cheeks and painted lips but served
To accentuate the mockery of the eyes,
Filled with self-loathing for their hapless lives;
A woman with dark poppies in her hat—
A nodding thing that shaded half her face—
A woman with a kindly voice and eyes—
Drank porter with her man—she called him "Bill"
(Bill was a porter Covent Garden way,
And they'd been married thirty years that day),
And talked about the show they meant to see
That evening in the Hippodrome. She said

She'd been herself in chorus years ago,
Turning and chatting friendly like, the while
Bill went to order two more pints of stout—
And liked the life, until—well, hear herself—
"I'd plenty boys who took me out—but Bill—
Bill 'ad a 'eart of gold—was steady too—
Yes, steadiness itself was poor old Bill—
Bill wanted me. At first I laughed at 'im—
I 'ad my other boys with cash to spin—
And Bill was dull and good. Then I fell ill—
And of the lot, the only one who came
To ask for me, when I was sick, was Bill;
And Sis says, 'You're a fool if you lose Bill.
Bill's been a friend—'e 'as, 'as Bill;
The others ain't no good; Bill's worth the lot.'
And, in the end I married my old Bill.
We've 'ad our scraps—my Bill 'e do get mad
At times—but that don't never last with Bill.
I knows my Bill—'e don't mean 'arf 'e says.
But, when the kiddie died, it broke Bill's 'eart;
And there was times I sometimes used to think
My Bill 'd leave me for the little kid.
'E never speaks about the nipper now,
But sets and sets, and, wot I sometimes thinks
'E's just a sort of 'angin' round the shop,
Waitin' the time to put the shutters up,
An' then go 'ome.
'Ere's Bill come back. Don't let 'im ever 'ear

Wot I've been tellin' you or 'e'd get mad,
An', that'd fairly spoil our weddin' day."

A piper from the Guards, in tartan kilt,
Drank porter with a sailor from the Fleet,
Talked about boxing and the rate of pay,
Slanging, the while, the Yankee, "Pussyfoot."
A scholar quoted Lucan, and was capped
By one who cited Hesiod, and who swore
He could outquote the soldier or the tar,
Or any mother's son among the crowd.
He'd been to Oxford—Trinity, he said.
But drink and women—I can quite believe
The tale he told. God knows, he's not the first.
He'd give himself a month, perhaps, and then,
He laughed, and swore he'd stagger drunk to hell.
"This helps," he hiccoughed, pointing to the pot,
"It helps to kill—it helps me to forget
The pain. It's hell. The fifth nerve's what it's called.
That's death, the doctors say, and suicide
Or madness first. That's why I drink and drink.
Another, Miss, a double, if you please.
A month—they say a month will see me through,
And when I'm dead—let's hope to God I'm dead.
Here's luck. Good health. Well, cheerio, old Bean."

Old!
Not in years,
And yet with the best of the day behind—

I have lived and outgrown
The fancies and passions of youth;
I am willless, yet strong.
Long ago
I walked awhile with God in the woods,
On the dull, brown heath,
With its chrism ring of soaking mist,
And its calling birds,
Through the broken hills,
With their whispering dead grasses,
And shrivelled bracken, rustling like gossamer train,
In faerie pageantry,
By the storm-rent rowan trees,
Clutching the crumbling cliffs,
Rattling their bare limbs and chuckling in dripping caves,
Like very old folk in imbecile age,
By the dim, dark pools of the red-rimmed loch,
Where the winds, when the hunt is up,
Shriek with the laughter of the dead gods,
Bearing at eve, in the darkling of night,
Sad contemplation and the still thought of death,
And, in the morning,
Joyous greeting and hope and strength to endure—
Then, from the mellow nothingness of alabaster night
I passed and forgot—
Fool!
God, in the crucible,
Puts in our hands, Eternity, to mould in Time.

'Tis strange, the talk one hears in London bars,
The men one sees, who lean across their drinks,
And smoke and spit and shout and speak about—
I've often wondered, what—
Women, most likely, or the price of drink,
Or art, or learning, or perhaps they plan
A murder, or a burglary, or tell
How, late one night, they robbed a drunken man,
And fear the 'tecs will nab them in the end.
Bedraggled outcasts, with their visions still—
The ghosts of dreams that haunt them in their sleep,
And fill the death-chill of their waking hours,
Yearning for home and children, who had made
Good mothers, had the censure of the world
Been kindlier. Perhaps, the memory
Of some quiet English home, a mother's kiss
Or prayer, the touch of soft, caressing arms,
May rise, at some sad moment in their lives,
And lead them, pitifully, back to God.
Perhaps, but half remembered through the years,
Some childhood scene, the church with clanging bell,
The simple service on the Sabbath day,
Where, in the sacred aisle, the soft light falls
On careworn faces, seamed and weatherbeat—
Dull, homely faces, seen in field or street,
But in God's very presence, beautiful;
The rise and fall in quavered harmonies
Of broken litanies; the gentle voice,

Telling the wondrous story of the Cross—
These suddenly become
A mirror, where they see
Present impurity,
Sad memories that torture as they rise,
And, rising, heal.

A moment, some may seemingly escape
The complex problems of our common life,
And, heedless of the other's fret and pain,
Pursue their wanton pleasures, till in hours
Of bitterness, the motley farce has seemed
Beyond belief, profane—but levelling Death
Holds strict account for all.
I sometimes wonder what God thinks
Of these poor outcast things—if such they are to Him—
Their judges! Who are they? The elegant
And careless women, with their haughty airs,
In thousands, off to dine and wine, perfumed,
Bedecked with jewels, pranked in soft lingerie,
Cackling their small talk to their cavaliers,
These handsome Englishmen, immaculate,
Aglow with health, who talk of public schools,
And go to man the Empire's distant posts,
Who stand for all that England, happy England, means—
The pretty little things with flashing eyes,
Sweet *ingénues*—who, having supped and wined,
Or spent a languid evening in their box,

Whirl to the *Empress* or some dancing hall,
And prance the fox trot or the super-jazz
To syncopated ragtime—
Yet "Happy England" means to myriads, what?
No stately homes, but some disgusting slum,
Where broken men drag out their brutish lives,
And wander listless in her sordid streets
In search of work or miserable dole—
Neurotic women and a teeming pack
Of brawling children, round them when they're ill.
A fool can talk of Empire when he's got
A bank account, and time to dress and bath.
Yes! England means a lot to those who live
In luxury, while millions sweat and toil,
Or cringe and beg, to earn the right to live.

Life! Strange, fantastic riddle for the brain
Of puny mortals, who would seek to grasp
The Universal plan, or match their wits
With God's infinitude—insoluble,
Yet to Faith's seeming clear. The seasons come
And go; the spring, with promise unfulfilled,
Draws soon to summer, and the falling year
Runs to its sunless close, and vision fades,
And we forget the purpose of our lives.
Not theirs, who live for self, to hear at dawn
The muffled anthems of Eternity,
And catch the rhythmic music of the chaunt—

The mystic paean in the choir of God
For those, who pass triumphant through the Halls
Of Time, and win them rest at evensong.

The drinkers came and went—
A racing man lurched in, and, leaning on the bar,
Leered at the blonde-haired beauty at the till,
Puffed at his cheap cigar and ordered Scotch.
"Good evening, Miss. 'As Charley bin in yet?
Not bin in yet! Most likely 'e 's a 'ead.
There's some can't stand their drink, and that's a fact;
'E's always that way when he's made some dibs
Spottin' a winner."

She handed him his glass,
And, chatting easily, took up the tale .
"I like old Charley—pal o' mine he is.
He ain't like some o' them as I could name,
Who're always after some low, dirty game—
A dinner or the pictures, nothing more—
And, if there's times he goes beyond the score,
And gets a little tiddled, well, my dear,
I've seen chaps tight on half a pint of beer.
There's other things about him, yes, I know;
Well, here, it was his missus made him so.
But Charley's straight—I've known him all my life,
Wanted a kiddie, till one day his wife
Turned round and told him straight

She hated him like hell, and swore
If ever she'd a ruddy kid by him
She'd drown the brat and swing.
If I'd been Charley I'd have took her ring
And flung it in her face. What Charley did?
One night he stayed out late.
I know the gal—a pal of mine she is;
There ain't a better one in town than Liz,
And handsome when she's dressed. The kiddie's his;
Why! Charley ain't a tool.
His wife's got her deserts, the silly fool!
I tell you, sir, it's women such as these—
Women as have a debt to pay and won't,
As drives their men to sin, and fills the streets
With—well—you know the kind of things one meets.
Can you blame Charley? I don't think you can,
For, after all, it's only half a man
Would take that lying down. Another Scotch?
There's more than him has made their lives a botch."

I sat alone and watched the boozy crowd,
Counting the rows of glasses on the shelves,
And cigarettes in castles neatly stacked.
A snarling cur sneaked through the swinging doors,
Among the tables with their marble tops,
Sniffed at the tipplers' legs and white spittoons,
And, when the racing man had said Good night,
His friend, the barmaid with the flaxen hair,

Jingling the ready money at the till,
Slopped down the counter with a wringing rag,
And swished the dingy beer into a pail.
Then, from the streets another sound stole in,
Piercing the din—a subtle, elvish strain
Of mandolin, and, as the song began—
A curious rondel with an ancient ring—
A silence fell unasked. And these the words
The hidden singer sang:

"I met a man the other day
Who said—I thought at first in play,
Though it didn't just quite sound that way—
    I'd like to live a thousand years.
  In fact," he said, "I think I'd give
  A thousand pounds if I could live,
  Or even if I thought I'd live
    Another fifty years."

"My friend," I said, "you surely jest,
For life is, after all, at best
A rather bitter sort of jest.
    I'm thirty-five, and I would give
  A thousand pounds if I could die."
  And when he turned and asked me why,
  I said, "I'm not afraid to die,
    But half afraid to live."

"But if I think that I can give
A little pleasure while I live,
I'd rather live than die.
And when I'm old, I'll take my pack,
Sling my poor chattels on my back,
And, having said my little say,
I'll pass along my weary way,
And end my peevish little day.
For, if I've done my very best
To help some other one to breast
The hill, it seems to me that I
Have clearly earned the right to die
And end the bitter jest."

The music and the singing ceased; a pause,
And he had gone who sang the song, taking
His music with him. Someone spat and cursed
The sneaking cur; the scholar spoke in Greek;
The sailor damned him, calling him a Dago,
And swore he'd swipe him one, unless he quit.
The soldier hiccoughed in a tipster's ear
Some bawdy tale, a cabman cut his plug
And capped it with another, as he filled
His pipe.

Then, **She** came in, and, looking round,
Espied me at the table where I sat
Drinking my bitters. Like a frightened thing

She crossed the room and dropped down on the bench
Beside me, timidly. She had a cough,
That racked her constantly, and, when I looked
Into her eyes, I read, alas! within,
The story of a soul that went in dread
Of some sad mystery. I saw that she was tired and wet,
And asked her what she'd take. She thanked me. Yes,
She'd like a sandwich and a glass of beer.
Then Bill's wife spoke; a kindly soul she was.
"A glass of beer—there's nothing wrong with beer
As I knows of, but you take my advice
And try some bottled Whitbread's stout, my dear,
That's got some body in it now; it's nice.
Just 'ave a tiny little drop with me;
You're lookin' tireder nor I likes to see."
Yes, she was weary, had a rotten day,
Things weren't very bright out Acton way.
"Down on yer luck, pore dear. I've been the same.
You jest arsk Bill 'ere, well 'e knows the game.
See, listen dearie, any night yer like,
Jest pop in 'ere, say jest abaht this time,
An' Bill or me ye'll nearly always see,
An' 'ave a bitters or a drop o' stout
With me and Bill, we're always 'ere abaht.
I knows it, dear, ye're feelin' pretty bad.
Well, there now, 'ave a tiny bite o' food,
And then a little drop o' beer inside,
Ye'll find 'll do yer jest a world o' good.

Well, so long, dearie, mind you don't forget,
Jest pop in 'ere, say, any night yer likes."
"Good night to you, sir. 'Urry Bill, or else
We'll miss them jumpin tykes you spoke abaht.
Drink dahn yer stout,
And let's get aht."

I watched her as she ate,
Ordered a second sandwich, for I saw
That she was weak and faint for lack of food,
And, in her gentle, careworn face I read
The weary story of her shattered life,
And knew her strife.
Forgive us, God,
Who look askance on any such as she,
We, who are fortunate enough to dwell
In sheltered homes, with love and tenderness
About our feet, who, hearing of the pain
And sorrow of the world, shut out its agony
From our complacent lives, as we would close
The shutters on a dreary winter night.

I with my seeing eyes,
And vivid thought evolving brain,
I see the hills and skies,
I know both joy and pain;
Yet there is nothing or on sea or land
That I would know, that I can understand.

In moments, from the summit of the hills,
I glimpse the Pisgah sight
Of the far-stretching plain,
Soon, but to find once more, my weary feet
Treading the old familiar path that drills
Its ragged way out through the dreary night,
Where Doubt and darkness meet.

A timid little thing with pallid face
And dimpled laugh that, still like summer's rain,
Brought sweetness when it came, and great dark eyes,
That told their tale, alas! too plain to read.
Her hands were small and pitifully thin,
With blue veins showing dark beneath the skin.
"You're very good," she said, "since yesterday
I haven't broken bread. I never drink,
Except at times perhaps a glass of beer,
But eat I must, if I beg a crust,
For it's cash I want, my dear.
And the cash I'll find if I walk till I'm blind;
Two quid, or a bed in the street.
She's a decent lot, out where I lodge,
And she knows I'm not the sort to dodge,
But she's got to live like the rest of us,
And she's got to think of the kids.
But my trip's near done; I've had my fun,
And the going's getting rough.
Two quid! That means, my God, that means

I must rob a soul of the best it has,
I must drag that soul to sin.
I must find some drunkard out in the streets,
Some sot in a reeking bar,
And carry him off to—God knows where—
For that's the sort we are;
I must sin to live, and live to sin,
God says that I must not die,
So sin I must if live I must,
Or else give God the lie.
But I pray that the simple folk at home,
Who think I'm doing well,
Will never know that they picked me up
Down in the depths of hell—
That they picked me up in some lonely street,
And wrapped me up in my winding sheet,
And buried me like some carrion crow
In an unknown pauper's grave.
Christ! bless the hour when they pick me up—
When they pick me up quite dead.
(Christ had not where to lay His head.)
I wonder if God will let me sleep,
And forget?
For I'm just like a kiddie that's lost in the street—
I want to be found and go home.
But I'm chained in a vice to the wheels of sin,
Body and soul to the wheels of sin,
And I can't cheat God when I'm dead.

Men talk of hell. That's the memory
Of the might-have-been, of a broken life and lost.
There would be no hell if men were wise,
And paused to count the cost.
Well, I've had my fun and my day is done—
I've gambled and I've lost,
And it's up to me to square with God,
Who knows the thing I've been.
(And the wages of sin are death.)
But there's still one friend in the world to come,
And that is the Christ who died;
He was kind to a woman, one just like me,
For me He was crucified.
(Still I wonder if He knows
How bitter is the cup.)
And now for the streets and that couple of quid,
The end of the play has come,
A month or two will see me through,
And the end of my so-called fun;
No stone to mark where my bones are laid,
Christ knows that the price is paid."

I scarcely saw or heard, for memory
Had bridged the fruitless years, and there arose
The vision of another such as she:

I saw her one night
Crouched by the rails in the Square,

And the dim lamplight
Darkened the grime on her cheeks and her look of despair.

Yes! haggard and old;
Toothless and mumbling for alms;
She was worn and cold,
She who had once held the world at her feet with her charms.

I tossed her a few
Coppers, as one throws a bone
To a dog. She flew
Wolflike upon them and uttered a pitiful moan.

A thought—but I dare
Not let it sink in my mind—
In the bleak, dull stare,
Steady, unseeing and glazed like the look of the blind—

Set deep in the lines,
Grim with pain and the wild
Din of life, still shines
That which God meant when He drew the first face of a child.

She rose,
And, leaning on the table heavily,

Stood, while a fit of coughing racked her frame,
Then, sitting down again, she slowly said:
"You're white; you've acted like a pal. Perhaps,
Before I go, you'd like to hear my tale.
I'll tell it. You're the sort that understands.
I left my home when I was quite a kid,
My home, it's not in London, that's enough.
I had a part in chorus, in Revue,
Till one night, coming home, I caught a chill.
Then came the crash, they turned me out to starve—
At supper with a friend I met a man—
Perhaps you guess the rest . . . these wondrous weeks
We loved like fevered things gone mad with love,
Speeding the fleeting hours from nothingness
Of self, to very ecstasy of pain,
But, when I sought to grasp my phantom happiness
I found love silent, lifeless, in my arms."

Two souls may separate
And go their ways,
But love's eternal, if it 'dures
But for a moment of our days.
The soul may die; men kill their souls
(The world is strewn with such).
But Love, itself, cannot be slain;
Love winneth over pain.

"One day, I read his marriage was arranged.
A bishop tied the knot, and Holy Church

Gave solemn blessing on the hideous farce—
(I wonder whether God laughs when He hears
These solemn vows exchanged
By victims of these marriages arranged!)
That wedding day
I plumbed hell's blackest depths, and heard
Somewhere in its vast silences a laugh,
A mocking laugh that rang across the hills,
Answering my anguished mood of bitterness.
(There is great loneliness in hell,
Where souls must expiate alone).
I cried aloud in agony, and, listening, heard
Dimly, the echo of my cry
Fade in the dreariness. I went alone,
And wander now through endless lanes of night
Alone, yet in a dreadful company.
I may no longer pray, for God has dried
The fount within my heart, repenting Him.
I've known a sinner saved, one such as I,
But, her, Christ gave repentance ere she died—
Could I but weep, then Christ would see
And pardon, in my agony."
She paused—
"There is no Christ for those who will to sin."

A one-armed fellow at the bar,
Hearing us talk of God,
Set down his glass, and, turning, came across

To where we sat. He looked at me and spat,
Then, edging to the little table, said:
"Lor, blimey, wot's 'e saying now—this bloke,
Wot drinks 'is beer, and talks abaht 'is Gawd
With wimmen in a pub? There's some gets tight
In funny ways. I 'its the missis and the kids
When I gets balmy—'its 'em good and 'ard.
But Gawd! There ain't no Gawd in London pubs.
'Ere, cheese it, mate; you go straight 'ome,
And take my bloomin' tip.
This 'ere's a Public, where men drinks,
And not a Rescue 'ut.
Wot's kep me straight, 'as bin the fear
O' beaks and cops and quod;
It ain't the Church, it ain't the priest,
It ain't Almighty God.
I'll have another bitters, Miss—
Bit mirky-like outside;
We might 'ave rain; won't be surprised.
Change? Thankee, Miss. That's right. . . . .
And, Mister, 'ere, you talk of Gawd,
But Bill 'as lost 'is sight,
I've lost my arm, there's millions dead,
There's thousands walk the streets for bread,
And Gawd don't give no sign.
For chaps like Bill—as lost their sight—
Who'll sit to the end in blackest night,
A ribbon or two, a bob or two—

And the streets for the likes o' she.
And them fine dames, with 'aughty names—
'Er sisters, aren't they?
Wot says abaht the blind,
'It ain't 'arf bad to lose yer sight,
The blind is so resigned.'
Well, I arsk you, Sir, do you think that they
As goes to church to kneel and pray,
Would touch the likes o' she?
It makes me sick, I tells yer straight,
To think, this very night
These very dames as 'ave their homes—
(Perhaps they've kiddies too,)
Are rottin' round and foolin' with
Some other woman's man.
And Gawd, who seems to wink at such,
Don't wink at the likes o' she—not much.
It's wimmen, Mister, such as these,
As marry without shame,
Not just because they love a man,
But for 'is rank and name;
Lor! what a game!
It's them, as drives their men to sin,
Should be walkin' the streets o' the town.
I tells you, Sir, there ain't no Gawd,
Not 'ere in London town."

I sometimes wonder whether God
Just made the world for fun,
In spirit of gigantic mockery,
Or, if He still makes in His leisure hours
New worlds, as children twist their paper boats,
Which, being made, are launched,
And perish presently.

And yet, this world God made
Is very beautiful.
Men hate to leave it, hate the thought of Death
And going hence. He cannot better that.
As Art, the world is God's great masterpiece.
The air, the sky, the mountains and the plains,
The scent of new turned earth and coilèd hay,
The rain, the snow, all that delights the eye and ear,
And makes Earth Paradise.
And yet, 'twas this same God, who made
The beasts of prey,
And Nature, with its ruling principle of—Kill,
And fashioned in His image, Man,
High as himself, yet lower than the beasts,
Man, prostituting Reason, who has made
Of Heaven a hell.

God sees, yet gives no sign . . . .
Is God so busy with His other work
He has no time to spare

For this sad planet hurtling to its doom?
Perhaps He's sick of Man.
The Earth's so small, its time so brief,
Its separate lives, infinitesimal
As atoms in infinity,
Swept like a speck of dust before the gale.
Man's mighty wars, unnoticed in the spheres;
His mightiest conquerors, strutting out their hour,
Pass into nothingness—
The poor ephemeralities of princely pomp,
His orders, ribbons, titles, meaningless.
Man's little hour runs out, and Death,
Mingling his princely clay with common earth,
Holds revelry at Court.

Let's hope, Death after all,
Is just a sleep,
When, pillowed on God's breast, we lie
And weep
Ourselves with happiness, asleep.
What matters should we die to-day,
Or live a few more paltry years,
We do but add to sorrow's tale,
And fill the beaker fuller yet!

Happy the babe who quits the world
Before its pain
Grips heart and brain!

I cannot read God's plan—
God thinks as God, and Man as Man.

I sometimes think that only chance
Explains the *motif* of life's dance.

There fell a wondrous silence in the place.
Methought, the din of London ceased,
The myriads crossed with noiseless feet;
The smoke-wreathed faces in the dingy room
Seemed passed away,
And ONE stood there, with tender hand outstretched,
Beckoning—

She rose, and left me with a sigh,
Nor spake a single word,
Passing the row of tipplers at the bar,
And, as she passed, she wept.
—She, too, had seen the Vision Beautiful,
And knew Christ lived. . . .

When she had gone, the din broke out afresh. . .

MERE GAUDIN.

Mère Gaudin lived by the ferry,
  Hard by an old French town;
Her eyes were black as the berry,
  Her cheeks were tanned and brown—
And I'd often take her wherry
  In my rambles up and down.

When she was young and pretty,
  And more foolish than wise,
A gallant made a ditty
  And stole her love with lies—
So many men are witty,
  So few are good and wise.

Care peeped in and unchidden,
  Bespoke him board and bed;
Alas! this guest unbidden
  Has always to be fed!
And now her love lies hidden
  In a casque of lead.

BERTHE

Montreuil's a very ancient city—
A city was old when Rome was young!
A city whose tale has oft been sung
By poets, forgotten now, more's the pity.
The city stands on a gentle hill,
Encircled by forts of Vauban still,
And the rounded tower of Berthe looks down
On the winding Canche and the Lower Town.
Round Bertha's name there surely clings
A legend, which every urchin sings,
Which tells, how the good wives of the city
Brought bread to the 'prisoned Queen, in pity,
Ere she pined and died of a broken heart,
Done to death by a coward's art.
A hundred names before me rise—
Names of foolish folk and wise,
And a hundred tales of other days,
When folk lived and sinned in the same old ways—
For the world rolls on unchanged and unchanging,
As you see, where'er the eye goes ranging.
Of battles and sieges, defences and rallies,
Of burnings and rapings, of murders and sallies,
The ancient city has surely seen
Its share, and more than it, I ween—
I heard a sound—a Breton chaunt,
Pealing in a world of want;

A song that danced and tripped and rang
Down the cobbled village street;
A song that danced and tripped to meet
The glancing hours; a song that sprang
Quick as shower of summer rain,
On the soft Picardian plain;
A song with a slow and sad refrain,
Singing of ancient days in France;
Of Death and War, of pike and lance;
Of warriors grim who passed this way,
Of knights and lords and ladies gay,
Of queens with courtiers in their train,
All turned to common dust again;
An antique strain, such as peasants sing
On a holy-day or a pardoning.
And, ere the tripping strain was stilled,
And the summer air was filled
With the scent of the soft and fragrant rose
Every cot in Artois knows,
An echo rang down the Roman way,
Singing of youth and love in May—
I heard the words, "In youth is pleasure,
And joyaunce and hope in endless measure."
I forget what else they said,
But, that was the gist of the theme they played.

She sat and knitted by the door
That swung inwards on the sanded floor,

A lovely maiden, fair and sweet,
Just such an one as you would meet
In a dream of Fair Women—a tender thing,
Of whom a youthful poet would sing;
With eyes as pure as her soul was pure,
And a gentle smile of sweet allure;
And sun-kist braided hair of gold,
With a look was chastened, but not cold,
And eyes that sparkled with roguish mirth—
The eyes of the mother that gave her birth;
And a voice was soft and low and kind,
As the thistle down in the summer wind.
On summer days; as we passed along,
We could hear the lilt of Bertha's song,
As she sat and knitted by the door,
When the moment's household task was o'er.
And, when the wind from the West had a sea-weed tang,
And hummed in the marsh where the fire-fly sang,
She could hear, afar, the distant note
Of the Chartreuse bell, with its brazen throat,
Ringing to welcome even-song,
At the close of the weary day and long.

II

The sister stole to the window sill;
The night was calm and the world lay still;
She knelt to pray o'er a mighty ill.

Athwart, there flutters in the gloom,
An owlet, swart as he came from the tomb,
And the convent trees full ghostly loom.
The Convent's asleep. One dark cloud rolls,
Peopling the earth with shadowy trolls
And strange night cries, as of passing souls.

Jesu! Forgive that man and his art,
And the play in which he played his part.
Jesu! Forgive that man his sin,
Who stole and broke a maiden's heart,
Crushing the purest gem within.
Ah! But the streets of the city are grey and cold,
For the poor, the weak, the faint, the old.
The streets of the city are cold and grim
For those who are worn and frail of limb,
Who have torn and racked the weary clay,
And toiled to the end of the bitter play;
For friendless ones, who never knew
The gift of home and friendship true;
Who go alone, tired, ere they started,
And sink, at last, down broken-hearted. . . . .

A haggard face looks out in the night,
A face half seen in the red lamp-light.
The window blind is ragged and torn.
God! Can it be that babes are born
In holes, the very beasts would scorn,

And bred amid brawling, filth and din,
In dens areek with beer and gin—
The mother—a wife without a ring—
A poor, weak, sad, misguided thing,
Long ere she had learned to tread
The pathway leading to the dead,
To the jangling note of the chapel bell,
Ringing her weary way to Hell. . . .

I hear the music rise again,
Like the moan of a passing soul in pain,
Twinging and whirling down the street,
Where sorrow and pain and anguish meet.
I hear it as the midnight silence grows,
Frail as a flower at the summer's close;
Or a dream cloud brushing the winter moon,
Or the soundless lilt of an elvish croon,
That jigs like a thousand impish things,
Swirling and reeling like things with wings. . . .

What is she who lingers there,
In the pale and murky glare
Of the lamplight in the Square;
Creeping like some leper by,
In some hellish fantasy;
Stealing like a hunted thing,
When the bells of Hell-hounds ring;
Fleeting as the shadows fly

From an angry winter sky;
Chilling like the feeble breath
Of the soul in very Death? . . . .

III

Bertha sits by her cottage door,
But her song is stilled, her dream is o'er.
Her heart is dead, her soul is torn,
And she thinks of her dead babe that was born.
She prays for the man whose guileful art,
Stole her love and broke her heart;
For the Little Sister that took her in,
Saving her soul from greater sin;
And she prays for the weary ones that walk
In shame, and drink the bitter draught.
No longer she dreams of old romance,
Of queens in ancient days in France;
No longer her feet trip light in the dance;
For the sorrow she passed has changed her song,
From a lilt of love to a tale of wrong.
The parish priest was a Christ-like man,
Who showed his daughter, as a good man can,
The way to peace of mind again.
And every feast-day Bertha goes
Out where the dust of the North road blows,
Down where the ancient Calvaire stands,
And she touches the sorrowful feet with her hands. . . .

CRACOW

I like to wander up and down
The greasy streets of Cracow town,
And watch the motley rendezvous
Of Russian, Pole and Austrian Jew.

There is a sad philosophy
In every grimy face I see—
They seem like men who walk about
In some gigantic roundabout,
Of abstruse philosophic doubt;
While, in every Jewish face,
I read the future of the race—
Sordid creatures in the main,
From some dull Galician plain,
Ling'ring, just like men who wait
The arbitrament of Fate,
Where the pedlar shouts his wares,
And the Tatra rustic stares,
Tramping through the mottled slush,
In the Sukiennice's rush;
And where the crippled soldiers beg,
Minus arm or minus leg;
And Dives jostles Lazarus,
And Death sits cheek by jowl with us;
Where the Polish lancers strut,
In uniform of latest cut,

Side-whiskered in the ancient fashion,
As becomes such lords of passion;
Or, where by the Barbican,
Franciscan and Dominican,
Jostle with patrician,
And where mitred head and cope
Mell in quaint kaleidoscope.
Mary's Church, with tapestry,
Sculptured roll of ancestry,
Princely tomb with heraldry—
Where, in the dim and ghostly light,
The tripping shadows dance at night—
With its tapers all alight,
And the mournful litany,
Swells the mellow harmony;
Stern Cathedral looking down
On the streets of Cracow town,
With its brass sarcophagi,
Where the dead kings thickly lie,
Staring upwards to the sky;
Royal palace of the kings,
Recalling half-forgotten things,
And, where visionaries see
Restored, its ancient pageantry—
Rich in hoary legendry;
Kosciusko's monument,
Halls where Copernicus once spent
Hours of studious merriment—

What are these to those that go
Ever homeless, to and fro;
For those urchins in the Ghetto,
Shrilling it in high falsetto;
Elders in the Synagogue,
Mumbling their dreary Decalogue;
Those ancient hags about the doors,
And brawling women in their scores,
At windows with fantastic lines,
And faded, tarnished Hebrew signs,
Who live where dull depression lies,
Leaden grey, in haunting eyes?—

Sculptured gargoyles, leering down
On the streets of Cracow town.

Can it be that Jesu died,
And that He was crucified,
At this solemn Easter tide,
For those Jews in Cracow town?
Or, does Pope or priest or nun,
Think that there is only one
Way to worship, 'neath the sun?
Or that God belongs to those
Who adopt a special pose,
And who chaunt on bended knee,
Monkish-made Latinity,
And who God, have fashionèd
For their own especial trade?

Still, I wonder what they think,
Those Russian Jews, that never drink,
Or smoke or play, but always stink
Of Russian leather and pomade,
Babbling their Yiddish rodomontade!
Have they pierced the outer ring
Of Life, that mere external thing;
Or grasped its outward imagery,
Is but a mere sad phantasy;
And, that beyond mere worldly strife
The pathway lies, that leads to life?
But—if, two thousand years ago,
They murdered Him with curse and blow—
'Twould not be strange if, still, to-day,
They bade Him pass along His way,
To wander homeless, up and down
The dreary streets of Cracow town.

And, that's why, in every face, I see
The same still, sad philosophy.

A BALLAD OF THE CAFE ROYAL

I took a walk down Regent Street,
To visit old, familiar places,
Hoping, perhaps, that I would meet
Some half forgotten friendly faces,
And turned into the Café Royal,
Sat at the table where I used to
Sip absinthe with a fellow Boyle
And others never introduced to.

The place seemed just the very same as
I used to know it years ago—
The same old waiters fetching glasses,
The little tables in a row;
The same old lights, the same old voices,
The same old mirrors on the wall,
And, though I wonder where old Joyce is,—
Nothing seemed really changed at all.

I felt a curious sense of lightness,
I felt as if I trod on air,
The atmosphere, the very brightness
I used to think, one only found there,
Was mounting to my head like new wine,
Until the lights before me dazzled,
And, as a Yankee friend of mine
Would say, I felt a sort of "razzled."

And, when a girl who sat beside me,
  Turned round and asked me for my matches,
I felt the hags of care might ride me,
  But, I was young again, in snatches.
I handed her a light, and watched her
  Inhale, exhale, and puff a smoke cloud
Towards some gallant, who had snatched her
  Roving eye among the crowd.

The place was packed; the noise of clinking
  Glasses added to the din,
I saw the girl beside me, sipping
  Very tenderly her gin.
Her hair was bobbed, her neck *decolleté*,
  Her hat, a flimsy, rakish thing,
Her fingers sparkled with a multi-
  Coloured sort of flashy ring.

Then Fritz—no, Pierre now, his name is—
  Or Tom, or something nondescript,
For Fritz has gone, and though the same is,
  His trade is rather badly hipped—
Pierre slipped through the rows of plushes,
  Trod on some careless fellow's hat,
And murmured to conceal his blushes,
  "Pardon! Mais M'sieu ordered vat?"

Pierre—it was the same old fellow,
  We called him Fritz before the War—

The same—though grown perhaps more mellow,
And showing now a timely scar,
With hair *en brosse* and moustache like a
Rampagious, bold Death's Head Huzzar's,
Whose very *tout ensemble* 'd strike a
Grim terror in a Son of Mars.

"Pardon, Mais M'sieu, 'e 'as ordered?"
(Pierre has grown a little thinner,
I'm sure on middle age he bordered,
Last time I saw the same old sinner)
"Ze absinthe, feenesh since ze guerre—ah—
Mais, M'sieu, 'e weel onderstand,
Mais, zere is zome—oh, ver fine beer—ah,"
And flicked the napkin in his hand.

And so, I wasn't quite forgotten,
But, there were changes in the place,
I wondered where they all had gotten—
Each well remembered, pallid face.
There are some have died out there in France,
And some who've died in other ways,
And some who jig it still, and dance
The weary routine of their days;

And some, grown old before their time,
And some, who've earned an evil fame,
And one or two, perhaps, who climb,

And others who have made a name;
And some, perhaps, who've married well,
And some who foot it on the stage—
And some whose tale will never tell,
And one or two who've died of age.

"I'll have a gin and Augustura,
And, bring the menu and I'll dine—
Steak underdone, and then, for sure, a
Large bottle of some decent wine."
"And, M'sieu—'e weel dine alone, or
Shall I set places 'ere for two?
Von moment, M'sieu, yes, von schooner*—
Von moment—I attend to you."

"Pierre—a place set for me only—
The others won't be here to-night"—
For I was feeling very lonely,
And dim and garish grew the light.
For, I was thinking of the others,
And knew that we should never meet,
For Jack and Tom, who were like brothers,
Went down at Jutland, in the fleet.

And Bob, who married some high flier,
Has grown a trifle prim and proud,

*Schooner: A glass of beer.

And as she's always climbing higher,
  He never mixes with the crowd.
And Hugh, who has a biggish family,
  Has grown domesticated, quite,
Though I still remember, once at Framley,
  We spent a very merry night.

"Pierre," I said, "I'll drink Falernian."
  "Pardon—zere only ees Sauterne"—
I dreamed I squared the old Quaternion,
  As, often, in the days of erne—
"Pierre, I'll drink to those are absent,
  Because I know they're with me still."
"Pardon—mais zere ees no more absinthe,
  Mais, M'sieu order vat 'e veel."

So, here I'm sitting in the Royal,
  And tasting the delights of yore—
I wonder, if 'twould be disloyal,
  To say I find the thing a bore?
Well! Pierre, at least can fetch the bumper,
  I'll drink blue devils out of sight . . . .
And then, the girl in orange "jumper"
  Said, "Kiddie, can you give's a light?"

HOME

'Tis good to find oneself at home again,
With old familiar ways and names and talk;
To come, perhaps grown peevish in the fight,
And, having seen pass, one by one, our dreams
From our frail tenure, out into the night
Of what, uncomprehendingly, we call
Eternity—and learned the bitter tale
Of Life's sad make-belief—and, weary, turn
Like children, bruisèd at their heedless play,
To restful haven at their mother's knee.

'Tis good to scent again at wakeful dawn
The cold spring rain, the newly turnèd mould;
To watch the solemn rhythm of the mists,
And hear the wanton rush of impish winds,
Thrusting through mesh of spruce and bilberry.
Yes! Here the moving finger slowly writes.
There are new faces now, but still, for me,
The old sweet things remain. I see and hear
The kindly face, the old familiar voice
Of him who placed his simple faith in me,
And old friends are the only ones I see
Rising across the mist of backward years.

I turn and gaze upon the silent hills,
Ringed with their fading fringe of winter snow,
Immutable, yet having in themselves
The mortal principle, and ask in doubt,
"Is effort worth"? . . . .
I cannot help but think
That, somewhere from Eternity, HE speaks,
And that He knows, I know.

THE COMMON STAIR

It's very plain and very bare,
The little home I mean,
And, though 'tis on a common stair,
It's, oh! so sweet and clean.

And every single time I mount
That common wooden stair,
I know that I can always count
On being welcome there.

They haven't very much to give,—
The couple that live there,
Or else they wouldn't choose to live
Right on a common stair.

But this they have, that's better far
Than gold or land or rent,—
Pure souls the world can never mar,
And eyes of sweet content.

So, when I'm tired and worn out,
With bitterness or care,
I always make, without a doubt,
For that poor common stair.

And when I've sat and talked a while,
They never seem to mind,
If, when I go—I laugh and smile—
And leave my load behind.

OLD FOLK

They're growing very old and frail,
They're getting very near the Vale,
A little while, and there will be
No longer any home for me.

As child, as boy, as man, I've seen
The days of triumph that have been,
In hours of sorrow, I have wept
With them, while Time, the Robber, crept.

And now, I know that this may be
The last time I shall ever see
The old familiar group, which I
Shall love and cherish till I die.

They've come a long and weary mile,
And passed so many with a smile,
That now, they sit alone and wait
The tardy opening of the Gate.

Well! Some day, I, too, may grow old,
My hair turn white, my blood run cold,
And younger folk will shake their head,
And say I, too, shall soon be dead.

But when my evening runs to night,
May I, like them, be waiting, bright
To greet the long-expected guest
Whose coming brings the weary rest!

NIGHT THOUGHTS

I rise uneasily from heavy sleep,
  Awoke, as by the icy hand of Death—
I hear the swallows chirping in their ledge,
  The whirr of sable wings on slumbrous flight;
The timorous bleat of some poor errant sheep,
The myriad chorus in the dreary sedge—
  And, in the sacred stillness of the night,
The even rhythm as of God's own breath.

  What mingles with the silence of the Dark?
    A passing wind, that clamours with the stream—
    But, in my unquiet fantasy, I dream
I hear without the tread of prowler stark,
    Whose lone call, piercing through the pallid gloom,
    Answers my soul at issue with its doom.

ON A FRIEND'S HOME-GOING

The mourners go about the darkened house,
Silent and few; the wind moans fitfully,
The snow pads softly on the window pane—
And, thou art gone into the night, alone . . . .

A sad grey house, whipt by the winds,
Dull, grey and old—a house with paintless eaves,
And panes grown rheumy in the Norlan' blast;
A green age-crinkled door with jagged piles
Of gravel by the porch; beyond the brook,
Befringed with bracken and pale, yellow rush,
Three storm-tossed beeches by a plot
Of ragged garden, rude, and bare;
A broken spade; a stump of rusty rake;
A fringe of pine woods, yielding in the gaps,
Far vistas of fair distant fields and farms,
And clean, straight ways, that wind
Down to the villages below. . . .

And when night falls, the watcher hears
A myriad and mysterious life—
A rat, a prowling cat, a grubbing duck,
The cattle browsing drowsily, a bat
In solemn, drunken flight, a rutting hare,
And, round the depthless pools,
The ceaseless flyting of the gulls, a spit
Of gathering rain, the grim, remorseless marshalling
Of soaking mists, the whisper of the winds,

Passing like ghostly watchers on their rounds . . .
I love the grim, bleak barrenness that was thy home,
And, there is one sad comfort that I read,
That, though life was for thee a very mockery of life,
In all the little things which test the soul's capacity,
Thou wert in very deed and sooth
A servant true and faithful to the end.

THE GOAL

Yes! Here he lies, still in the grave at last;
Dust unto dust, with meaner mortals' clay!
The murmured prayers are ended, and the caste
Of mourners files along the pathway, past
The others, mere spectators of the play.

He reached his goal, and, for a little hour,
Wielded his brief authority, until
Death, mocking at a puny mortal's power,
Strode to the gate, and, knocking at the tower,
Bade the uneasy revelry be still.

He taught, in life, the measure of a man
Is man's success—and had no seeming place
For those who stumbled, ere they well began
To labour on their ill-constructed plan,
And, in first failure, further failure trace.

A few who knew—those who had learned to look
Into the heart and judge the deeper things,
And were well versèd in the Golden Book,
And disciplined through suffering, to brook
Earth's weary tumult that incessant rings—

These said, that all the outward petty show,
To him, meant nothing in his inmost heart,
And that there flickered still the feeble glow
And early flame of kindliness, below
The pompous crust, the artificial part.

"When you and I are married,
And, soon as we are wed,
We'll ask Love in to dinner,
And give him board and bed;
And, when we've dined and humoured him,
We'll steal the errant's pack,
And he must stay, a many a day,
Ere he may have it back."

"Young man, when we are married,
'Tis sad, but must be said,
Another guest will surely come,
And bide with us instead.
If I must toil and worry,
And knit and spin for you,
The flower you'll carry—that's *if* we marry—
Will be a sprig of rue."

"So, while you are still single,
And I am still a maid,
You have the chance to pick and choose
Some other girl instead!
But, speed, for time is flying,
Who hesitates is lost,
And, ere you take another make,
Count well, young man, the cost."

"Sweet, let's to kirk this minute—
  Nor shake your pretty head,
You know, I could not, 'pon my oath,
  Another maiden wed.
And, as perchance it happens
  That, what wise men say is true—
That Youth's a flower—let's snatch the hour—
  To-morrow will not do!"

So, we've met once again, lass,
After seven year!
The War 'twas came between us,
Tho' we were very near—
And now, I cannot marry you,
I may not call you—Dear.

Perhaps 'twas really wise, lass,
You chose to be a maid,
That I went to the wars, lass,
And faced the fusillade—
Perhaps 'twould have been best, lass,
If, when I'd gone, I'd stayed!

Wise folk said we were foolish,
But that's all past and done,
And, what I've lost for aye, lass,
I have forever won,
For, if one dream is ended,
Another has begun.

But, you and I no more, lass,
Shall plan our ways together,
Tramp the London streets, lass,
Wearing good shoe leather,
Nor wander through the peat hags,
'Mong the muir and heather.

For, that was seven long years since,
And, now, we're growing grey,
And Time and toil and sorrow
Have ta'en our youth away—
Ah! we were very foolish,
Some really wise folk say!

They say that Time's a robber,
That thieving is his trade,
And that he has made a zany
Of many a lass and maid;
And that there's no man living
Has never been betrayed—

The Past is yours and mine, lass,
That is our loss and gain,
The Present, he may take, lass,
And bring us dule and pain—
But he cannot steal the Past, lass
Where we are young again!

IN THE HIGHLANDS

Would I were back in the Highlands!
In the quiet, lonely places
Where the speech of the folk is low and kind,
And the eyes are soft and mild!
Where one reads welcome in strong faces,
Tanned by the sun and the wind,
And where, ah! me!
I could sleep once again the dreamless sleep of a child,
Lulled by the croon of the Western sea,
Breaking on the shores of enchaunted isles—
. . . . There would be tears in my eyes and smiles,
If I were back in the Highlands!

THE POET DOTH ADMONISH HIM

I sometimes think that I shall die
  Before I've reached my prime;
Pale Death shall sing my lullaby,
  And I'll be dust and grime.

But, if before the year is out,
  My name should be forgotten,
Shall I be dead? I greatly doubt,
  Although my body's rotten—

'Tis not the tale of years men live
  That counts, but how they're spent;
Not what we get, but what we give,
  Is our just measurement.

And what we give, we never lose,
  And what we lose we gain.
We live but once, and may not choose
  To pass this way again.

LOVE IN A LIFE

I

If I should chance to die
  In these wide spaces here,
My sleep might be disturbed
  By one well-grounded fear.

Not that wise men should care
  One atom where they die;
Their bodies rot the same,
  No matter where they lie.

But I should hate to think
  That, when I'm dead and gone,
My name would mean no more
  Than mere lettering in stone!

II

A man of simple faith,
  Of humble hope and grace,
He toiled among the poor,
  Till, wearied in the race

He lay at last, at peace,
  Among the simple few;
Building as he could,
  But better than he knew.

For a poor old woman came,
With a face was worn and brave,
And placed a withered flower,
Years after, on his grave.

I knew what she would say—
I read her passing by;
For, in that woman's soul,
His work shall never die.

HOPE ENDURETH WITH LIFE

No! No! Thou art not dead,
  Although I saw thee lying
In thy narrow bed,
  And the folk all crying.

Saw them hap thee round,
  And strew thy feet with roses.
Green will be the mound
  Ere the summer closes!

Sleep, and I'll come soon,
  And have thee there beside me,
There is lots of room
  In the mools beside thee.

IF WINTER COMES

I used to think the days were long,
  For, there was still to-morrow,
But, now, alas! I've changed my song,
  And made a tryst with sorrow.

For now the morrow's come and gone,
  And run to yesterday,
The days grow shorter one by one,
  December is my May.

PS 8535 092C45
Roy, James Alexander
Christ in the Strand

PLEASE DO NOT REMOVE
CARDS OR SLIPS FROM THIS POCKET

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO LIBRARY